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RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 4839
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 8391
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RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 1673
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 RANGOON 000503

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SUBJECT: BURMA: OPPOSITION DIVIDED ON THE WAY FORWARD

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Classified By: P/E Chief Leslie Hayden for Reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Burma's pro-democracy opposition remains divided on how to respond to the regime's new constitution and the next step on the regime's "roadmap to discipline-flourishing democracy": the 2010 parliamentary elections. Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD party has formally rejected the new constitution and called for the formation of the 1990 Parliament, in which the NLD won the majority of seats. They have not yet made a decision on whether or not NLD will participate in the 2010 elections. Ethnic MPs-elect state they will break with the NLD if it decides to participate in the election, on the grounds that participation challenges the legitimacy of the 1990 Parliament. Younger members of the pro-democracy opposition, however, plan to form parties and run in the 2010 elections in an effort to effect change and promote dialogue with the regime in whatever way possible. As the pro-democracy opposition struggles to find a way forward after the referendum, it is increasingly weak and fragmented. Ordinary Burmese do not care about the abstract policy mandates of the 1990 elections in which many were too young to participate, and find the old guard increasingly irrelevant. Instead, most Burmese want practical solutions to improve education, healthcare, and their standard of living. End Summary.

The NLD

¶2. (C) Pol/econ chief met with NLD "Uncles" U Nyunt Wai and U Lwin, to find out the NLD's plans and strategy in the wake of the implementation of the regime's new constitution and planned 2010 Parliamentary elections. The Uncles stated that whether or not the party participated in the elections would depend on the new election law, which they anticipated the regime would introduce in October. The Uncles were not sure if the regime would disband the NLD, but were convinced that even if allowed to participate, the regime would manipulate the rules or results in such a way to assure the NLD could not win.

¶3. (C) U Nyunt Wai stipulated that at this moment, the NLD could not say if it would participate in the elections

because the party was currently "under protest" of the regime's "illegal constitution." He was emphatic that the protest must continue because it could bring about political change, though he could not specify how. U Lwin added that the future was uncertain, but the NLD would open a path to democracy. He could not offer any specifics on future plans.

Both Uncles emphasized that economic conditions in Burma were deteriorating, and the people deserved a government that could help them improve their lives. Asked about a party strategy to do this, the uncles did not offer one. On June 19, the NLD issued a statement urging the regime to convene the 1990 Parliament to discuss the response to Cyclone Nargis and the "national crisis" of the economy and the legitimacy of the new constitution.

The Lady and the Doctor

¶4. (C) In a separate conversation with the Charge d'Affaires, Aung San Suu Kyi's doctor, Douglas, said that ASSK was "sympathetic" to the NLD opting out of participation in the 2010 election, which he believed would lead to the regime deregistering the party in September. Douglas cited "principles" as the basis for this position, explaining the Party should not participate in the election since that would recognize the legitimacy of the regime's constitutional referendum. Douglas acknowledged that the Uncles wanted to preserve their claims to parliamentary seats, but added they would honor ASSK's wishes if she directed the party to participate in the elections. Douglas continued that ASSK had a "plan B" for participation in the elections and had directed him to begin recruiting respected community leaders to run under the auspices of a separate party that would be

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formed for the 2010 election. When the Charge pointed out that this strategy appeared to split the NLD and weaken the party, Douglas acknowledged the contradiction.

¶5. (C) Douglas said he had learned from patients he treated that imprisoned 88 Generation Students leader Ko Ko Gyi, and people close to him in the "pro-roadmap" camp, were preparing to participate in the elections, but that Min Ko Naing disagreed. The Charge noted that labeling those who chose to participate in the election as "pro-roadmap" cast aspersions. She said a good case could be made that the Burmese people have a right to choose, and that it was important they be offered real choices.

¶6. (C) Douglas also expressed worry that the regime's mass-member organization, the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), was recruiting respected community leaders, which might garner them votes in the election, even if people did not support the USDA as a party. He described his own efforts to recruit potential candidates and claimed to have strong support in Chin and Rakhine State and in Tennassarim Division. He was now focused on Mandalay and Bago. He noted that his efforts in Rangoon and Irrawaddy Divisions were hindered because people were more focused on the relief effort than politics.

The Ethnic Leaders

¶7. (C) Ethnic MPs-elect from Arakan, Mon, and Chin States were emphatic that they would not participate in the 2010 election, as this would confer legitimacy on the regime's constitution and effectively nullify the Parliament elected in 1990, which the regime had refused to allow to convene. The leaders admitted that there was great dispute among the CRPP and NLD leadership regarding the approach the opposition should take to the 2010 parliamentary elections. If the NLD opted to participate in the elections, the ethnic leaders would break with them, they asserted. The leaders complained

that though they met frequently with the NLD, their ideas were often disregarded. Unification depended on the NLD, they stressed, the party needed to give more recognition to the needs of the ethnic nationalities. The MPs-elect said the policy unanimously adopted by the CRPP was to form the Peoples Parliament based on the results of the 1990 elections. Any other option was unacceptable to them.

18. (C) The ethnic leaders believed that despite the formation of a Parliament in 2010, the military would continue to control the country, based on its allotted twenty-five percent of parliamentary seats and control of key cabinet appointments. Participation in the regime's Parliament would be "useless" they stated. The MPs-elect could not offer any concrete strategies to effect change through non-participation, although they said they would organize marches and demonstrations to exploit what they believed would be inevitable splits between the military and the future Parliament.

The Younger Generation

19. (C) Many younger members of the pro-democracy opposition take a different view. They want to form political parties and run for Parliament in an effort to gain some voice in the future government. Toe Kyaw Hlaing, an 88 Generation leader who is quietly directing the movement while the other leaders are in prison or in hiding, told us this movement was suffering because the regime continued to arrest its members, and because of the absence of the unifying leadership of Min Ko Naing. The 88 Generation was always a loose coalition of various groups of students with strong personalities and generational differences. Min Ko Naing's gentle, good-humored leadership was key in keeping this coalition together, and his absence was felt, Toe Kyaw Hlaing lamented.

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110. (C) Toe Kyaw Hlaing said that many 88 Generation and NLD Youth want to form political parties and run for Parliament. As soon as the regime debuts its new election law, they will begin organizing and strategizing for 2010. The younger members of the opposition are fed up with the constant bickering and inaction of the NLD Uncles and the CRPP, Toe Kyaw Hlaing stressed. The new constitution was a reality and the pro-democracy movement must move forward to try to effect change any way it could, he emphasized. Toe Kyaw Hlaing believed the new Parliament could actually serve as a forum for dialogue between the military, political parties, and the ethnic nationalities. The pro-democracy supporters would only be included in this dialogue if they opted to participate in the election. Parliamentary debates, discussions, and committees could be a tool to discuss productive political and social changes in Burma, and a possible way to convert younger, more progressive military officers to new ways of thinking.

Although the regime had allotted twenty-five percent of Parliamentary seats to the military, nothing guaranteed this bloc would necessarily vote together all of the time, Toe Kyaw Hlaing speculated.

111. (C) The response to the cyclone had only increased popular dissatisfaction with the regime, and Toe Kyaw Hlaing was trying to build new alliances to capitalize on this discontent. He cited as an example a new generation of young, successful businessmen who were frustrated with the cronies' monopolization of the economy. He was exploring an alliance with them to finance campaigns for pro-democracy candidates. 88 Generation would try to choose candidates not overtly identified with the current opposition, so they would not attract immediate attention from the regime. Rather than being vocally anti-regime, he explained, these candidates could run on platforms proposing improvements in education, healthcare, and economic improvements, which would receive

broad popular support in an election.

¶12. (C) Toe Kyaw Hlaing emphasized the importance of bridging the divide between the ethnic nationalities and the predominately ethnic Burman NLD. 88 Generation planned to establish offices in Burma's ethnic states to consult with the cease-fire groups and ethnic opposition parties. These offices would be useful for forming relationships that could be a basis for dialogue and possible coalitions in a future Parliament, he stressed.

Comment:

¶13. (C) Division and infighting continue to characterize the leadership of the NLD and the CRPP. They appear more concerned with their own positions being recognized based on the 1990 results, oblivious to the struggles of ordinary Burmese struggling trying to make ends meet in a worsening economy and provide decent educations and healthcare for their children. Exile groups and media often paint a picture of the NLD as a strong, monolithic party with broad support. Though Aung San Suu Kyi remains a broadly-popular and inspiring figure, her party has suffered without her leadership and does benefit from the respect for her. The Uncles have made little effort to broaden the NLD's support among the ethnic nationalities, the population as a whole, and even the younger generation of the pro-democracy movement. Inside the country, most Burmese regard the NLD as weak and ineffective. Many were too young to vote in 1990 and do not consider the 1990 results representative any longer. NLD's silence on, and even criticism of the September 2007 protests lost further support.

¶14. (C) We need to recognize the generational shift of power from the geriatric 80-year-old NLD Uncles and Veteran Politicians to the 40 and 50-year-old 88 Generation Students and progressive businessmen. This younger generation first stepped forward last fall and again recently to provide relief after Cyclone Nargis. This is the generation who can make democratic change happen. We need to find ways to

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bolster their efforts. End comment.
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